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Teaching Argument Writing to ELLs

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Here's how teachers can prepare English language learners at three levels of proficiency for critiquing and writing arguments.

How in the world are we supposed to apply the Common Core writing standards to teaching English language learners?

We've been asking that question of ourselves and others over the past two years, and we suspect we're not the only educators doing so. After reviewing the many resources available that attempt to provide guidance to teachers of English language learners (see "[Resources of Note](#)") and combining what we've learned through our daily classroom experience, we've developed a tentative answer to that question.

Educators need to keep in mind three crucial elements when teaching writing to English language learners (ELLs) in the context of the Common Core State Standards:

- Students should begin by reading more informational texts than they did before—these can include closed-captioned videos and digital-supported forms—and they should engage in close reading. Teachers should help students focus not only on comprehending the texts but also on inferring deeper meanings, identifying the writer's craft, and seeking patterns in the text. There should be a strong connection between reading and writing.
- As students read in preparation for writing an argument, they should look for evidence they can use to inform their valid and logical claims and to critique other claims and evidence they might read.
- In their writing, students should use the structure, vocabulary, and style that best suits their purpose, topic, and audience. Teachers should provide ample opportunities for students to develop and use higher-level academic vocabulary.

Let's see what this looks like in the classroom with English language learners at three different levels of proficiency.

Teaching Problem/Solution Writing

Beginner ELLs: For Want of a Loaf of Bread

One way to fit problem/solution writing into the Common Core standards' argument category is by ensuring that students conclude their written pieces by choosing one of their possible solutions as the "best" one and supporting it with evidence.

When working with beginners, teachers can use a process originally developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and modified by the Peace Corps.¹ This process is designed to connect the challenges that students face in their lives outside school with language and literacy instruction. Here's how we introduced this strategy in a series of short lessons that took place over three consecutive days.

We started out by creating a word chart of problem/solution academic vocabulary, including such words as *problem*, *cause*, *effect*, *solution*, *evidence*, and *reason*. Students translated these words into their home languages, illustrated their definitions, and made a list of common English synonyms. Then we showed a short video clip of the scene in the film *Les Misérables* in which the main character is arrested for stealing bread to feed his sister's hungry family. The English subtitles reinforced the dialogue that the students were hearing.

We then asked students to describe what they saw. On small whiteboards, they wrote comments such as "in old city," "the man broke window," "he took food," "man run," and "police." We displayed these responses for the class.

Next, we asked students to share what problem they thought the clip portrayed. We modeled this concept in various ways—for example, by saying, and adding the appropriate sound effects, "My stomach is growling. What is the problem?" Students then used the sentence starter, "The problem is ..." to write out their responses ("the family is hungry"). Most students used similar words, which we also displayed on the overhead. We then asked students to identify, among those phrases they initially used to describe what they saw, evidence that this was indeed the problem. Before this, we had talked about how the comment "in old city" didn't show evidence of the family being hungry, whereas "he took food" did.

We then asked students what they thought *caused* the problem, using the sentence starter, "The problem is caused by" Students wrote such comments as "man not have job" and "rich people take all money."

Next, we asked students what they thought were the *effects* of the problem. Using the sentence starters, "One effect is ..." and "A second effect is ...," students wrote such responses as "the family gets sick" and "they die."

We asked students if they, their family members, or their friends had ever experienced a similar problem. Some responded, "We knew poor people in my country," "I see poor people," and "I poor."

Students shared the solution—how they responded to that problem—by drawing an illustration or using the sentence frame, "I (we, they) solved the problem by" One student responded, "I see a family poor in my country, and I help with food, money, and more." We then had students talk about other ideas for how to respond, using the sentence starter, "One solution is" Students said, "give them jobs," "get help from government," and "ask people for help."

In the past, we would have asked students to make a poster that described the problem and solutions both in words and images and then called it a day. However, in light of the Common Core standards, we instead had students combine the sentences we had written with the help of the sentence starters into a paragraph:

The problem is hungry family. The problem is caused by man not having job. One effect is the family gets sick. A second effect is family die. One solution is give them jobs. Another solution is ask people for help.

Finally, we had students add one more sentence to their paragraph, which required extensive teacher modeling, student drawing, and labeling: "I think the best solution is__ because__." Wrote one student, "I think the best solution is to learn a new job because he can get money."

This example shows how to use students' prior knowledge in conjunction with explicit academic language and grammar support. The activity offers repeated opportunities for students to reinforce their listening, speaking, and writing skills, including being able to focus on just one or two grammatical issues, such as subject-verb agreement. (For all English language learners, and especially for beginners, it's crucial to not go overboard and correct every single grammatical error.) We addressed grammar instruction through the use of *concept attainment*, an approach we'll address later in this article.

In addition to text and video clips, teachers can also use photos to introduce the problem. In fact, to make the lesson even more student-centered, we've often had students identify problems they'd like to study and contribute photos, text, or video clips that they've found to illustrate them.

Teaching Evidence and Claims

Intermediate ELLs: Whose Neighborhood Is Best?

One of our guiding principles is to look at our students through the lens of their assets. This approach is reflected in a project that our intermediate English language learners complete—comparing their neighborhood (where our inner-city school is located) with the wealthiest neighborhood in Sacramento, California (called the Fabulous Forties). Students write a persuasive essay about which is better, and 95 percent of the time they choose ... their neighborhood. How do they reach that conclusion?

First, using a word chart, we preteach about 10 vocabulary words, such as *affordable* and *demographics*. Next, on a handout we prepare, students identify and rate the qualities they value in a neighborhood they want to live in. These include such items as ethnic diversity, people who share their ethnicity, affordable housing, bus transportation, and so on. They also add their own suggestions. Students organize these items into categories, such as *money*, *people*, and *services*.

The next step involves going to the computer lab to research demographic data about the neighborhood in which students live. (Countless free websites provide this information by zip code.) We then go on a field trip to the

neighborhood, and students note—and photograph—which of their valued qualities they see. They also document what they see on a Google Maps printout of the neighborhood.

Both in the computer research and on the field trip, we emphasize that students are to identify evidence that supports the claims that their neighborhood has or doesn't have their valued qualities. Back in the classroom, students use their observations and research data to review their list of important neighborhood qualities and put a check mark on the ones located in their neighborhood.

Then it's time for the Fabulous Forties. We revisit the computer lab, where students use the same neighborhood research form to get data for that zip code. They write these data next to their home neighborhood data, using a different color pencil.

We take a field trip to the Fabulous Forties and repeat the same touring process we used in our school neighborhood. Back at school, students once again review their list of neighborhood qualities and put check marks in a different color next to the ones they feel are well represented in the Fabulous Forties. They then take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle, labeling one side "School Neighborhood" and the other "Fabulous Forties." On the basis of the check marks they made, they then list the qualities that each zip code has. The school neighborhood typically has a huge list, whereas the Fabulous Forties usually has few.

It's not unusual for students to comment about how the houses are much more attractive and the streets are cleaner in the Fabulous Forties. Nevertheless, they typically highlight many more appealing qualities they feel the Fabulous Forties are missing, such as ethnic diversity, mass transit, nearby stores, and affordable housing.

Finally, with all this information in hand, students use a simple essay outline, with appropriate scaffolds like sentence starters, to formulate an argument that explains which neighborhood they think is better and that provides evidence to support their position. The teacher then reviews the drafts to identify common grammar and spelling errors to address using the *concept attainment* instructional strategy.

In this strategy, the teacher puts correct spelling or grammar usage of a particular rule under a column labeled "Yes" on the overhead and puts incorrect usage under a "No" column (see fig. 1). The teacher shows students a "Yes" example and then a "No" example, with other similar examples covered by a blank piece of paper. The teacher gradually uncovers each sentence until students conclude what the common denominator is—in other words, what the "yes" examples have in common (in fig. 1, it's correct subject-verb agreement), thus determining the error and its correction.

Figure 1. Concept Attainment Strategy Chart

The teacher puts an example with correct spelling or grammar usage under a column labeled "Yes" on the overhead and an incorrect example under a "No" column and gradually uncovers each sentence until students determine what the sentences in the "Yes" column have in common. (The rows must be staggered to permit the teacher to uncover one example at a time.)

This figure shows examples with correct and incorrect subject-verb agreement.

Yes	No
Houses are cheap in our neighborhood.	Houses is cheap in our neighborhood.
The bus stop is close to my house.	The bus stop are close to my house.
The people in my neighborhood are from different cultures.	The people in my neighborhood is from different cultures.

In various years, we've had students create infographics comparing the two neighborhoods. We've also asked them to design their ideal neighborhoods and write about why they designed them the way they did.

In this neighborhood comparison project, students identify the criteria they'll use to determine their claim—not the other way around. They're doing close reading of digital texts and field research to identify additional evidence that supports their claims. Finally, the concept attainment approach gets students to use an assisted discovery process to improve grammar and spelling on the basis of examples from their own writing.

Teaching Argument Writing

Advanced ELLs: Smartphones—Good or Bad in Class?

Many writing tasks that students will be asked to do involve reading and responding to the arguments and proposals of others. Understanding how authors persuade their readers helps students both analyze and write arguments. Therefore, we started this school year by introducing our advanced ELLs to *ethos* (reputation, credibility); *logos* (reasoning, facts, and statistics); and *pathos* (emotions).

We introduced students to the basic meanings of these concepts by having them create visual representations of each word. For example, students drew pictures of experts, such as doctors and scientists, to represent *ethos*; a graph or percentages to represent *logos*; and people with various expressions on their faces to illustrate *pathos*. We drew a three-way Venn diagram to show how authors might use two rhetorical appeals to persuade readers or, to be really persuasive, a combination of all three.

The students were now ready to identify the use of these persuasive strategies in magazine advertisements. One student cut out an ad for face cream, which featured the statistic, "9 out of 10 women saw a decrease in wrinkles" as well as a photo of a woman laughing with her friends. Using the following sentence starters, one student wrote, "*This advertisement is using pathos because the woman feels young and happy with her friends*" and "*It also uses logos because it contains a statistic.*"

We then helped students practice another key skill in argument writing: distinguishing between claims and evidence. We selected an issue our school is facing—whether to allow the use of smartphones as a resource in class. Students practiced identifying claims by looking at good examples ("Students should be allowed to access smartphones during a lesson"; "Smartphones are a valuable resource in the classroom") as well as bad ones ("Many students have phones in their backpacks"; "Smartphones are not allowed in many schools"). Asking students to explain what the good examples had in common helped them identify the features of effective claims—mainly, that they're specific and debatable (that is, they have more than one side).

We used the same process for teaching students about effective evidence by showing them good examples (evidence that was relevant and sufficient to support a claim), such as, "Studies show that the use of smartphones to conduct research in the classroom can increase learning." We also showed them bad examples (evidence that was insufficient or irrelevant, or that contradicted the claim), such as, "My friend likes to use his smartphone in class."

Once students had familiarized themselves with effective claims and evidence, we moved on to a close reading of a text on the use of smartphones in the classroom. As we read the article aloud, we guided students to highlight the author's claims in one color and the evidence in a different color. This helped students see how the author organized his argument, sometimes presenting evidence first and concluding with a claim and at other times introducing the claim, providing evidence, and restating the claim at the end. In addition, we provided support for unfamiliar vocabulary.

Students labeled in the margins the different types of evidence presented (facts, statistics, interviews, quotations) and appeals used (*ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*). We prompted students to write in the margins why they agreed or disagreed with the author's claim and which piece of evidence they found the most convincing and why.

Students then created a storyboard illustrating the key ideas in each paragraph. They wrote key claims and evidence in their own words and drew a sketch to represent these ideas. Students used this visual summary to assist them in writing a summary of the article.

Now students were more ready to formulate their own claims. We gave them the following prompt: "What is the author's position on the use of smartphones in the classroom? To what extent do you agree with his position? Support your position with evidence from your personal experience, observations, or reading, including this article."

Students broke down the prompt by underlining keywords and numbering the steps they'd need to take. We showed them how to create their own graphic organizer, which they could use to brainstorm ideas. For example, students drew three boxes for each of the three parts of the prompt. In the first box, which was labeled "What is the author's position?" students used their visual summary to jot down notes. In the second box, labeled "To what extent do you agree with his position?" students used the annotations they made on the text to begin noting what they agreed or disagreed with. In the third box, labeled "Support," students listed possible evidence they could use to support their claims. As students began drafting, we offered sentence frames ("I agree to an extent that") to help structure their arguments.²

In this example, students identified the features of effective claims and evidence and explored these features through close reading by making both their annotations and their thinking visual. Graphic organizers and sentence frames, as well as preteaching and regular reinforcement of academic vocabulary, served as scaffolds for their learning. Responding to a writing prompt was less overwhelming because students learned how to create their own graphic organizers to support their thinking and writing.

Joining In

In all three of these examples, we gave students opportunities to practice evaluating claims and evidence and then formulate their own claims in response to this research. This is the basis of much writing in the Common Core standards, in college, and in life: We read and listen to the claims and proposals of others, and we respond and join the

conversation. Providing English language learners the tools they need to join this type of academic discourse is essential to their growth, both in English and as learners.

Some Do's And Don'ts

CLOSE READING

Do help students connect prior knowledge, make inferences, identify features of a text type, examine the author's purpose and style, and find the meanings of keywords that are crucial to understanding. Model and think aloud so students *hear* and *see* the reading strategies you're using. Choose texts that are worthy of a close read—ones that relate to the teaching goal and topic of study and are at an appropriate level of challenge for your students.

Don't discourage students from tapping prior knowledge. Don't do a close read of every text; students can practice the skills on their own with easier texts. Remember that the teacher should not be doing all the work. Students should be engaged and work collaboratively.

ARGUMENT

Do remind students of the argument skills they use in their everyday lives. Teach students to identify the difference between claims and evidence—that they must first examine data and evidence and then develop claims on the basis of this exploration. Give students multiple opportunities, both collaboratively and independently, to practice the thinking involved in argumentation. Give students the language support they need (such as academic phrases and sentence frames) to introduce, develop, and support their claims.

Don't ask students to formulate a claim about an unfamiliar issue or topic and come up with evidence to support it. Don't teach the skills of argumentation in an isolated lesson.

VOCABULARY

Do evaluate the texts and types of writing students will be working with and teach the academic language and structures students will need to access these tasks. Help students practice using this vocabulary in the context of meaningful interactions with their peers and by giving them the opportunity to use these words and structures in authentic reading and writing situations.

Don't just give students lists of vocabulary words in isolation. Don't expect students to learn how to use these academic words by simply looking up the meanings.

GRAMMAR

Do teach the grammatical structures associated with a particular text type in context. Identify good and bad examples in context to help students recognize and then apply the desired structures in their own writing.

Don't teach isolated grammatical skills out of context. Don't expect students to transfer these grammatical structures to their own writing if they're only filling out worksheets or doing grammar drills.

Resources of Note

- [*Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards Corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards*](#). (2012). By the Council of Chief State School Officers.
- [*Overview of the Common Core State Standards Initiatives for ELLs*](#). (2013). By TESOL International Association.
- [*Common Core Shifts*](#). (n.d.). By the New York State Education Department.

Endnotes

¹ See *Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Large, Multilevel Classes* (Peace Corps, 1992). Available at http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/library/M0046_tefllarge.pdf

² See Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's book, *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2009) for academic words and sentence frames that help students structure their arguments, introduce evidence, agree or disagree with the claims of others, address counterclaims, and formulate strong conclusions.

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KEYWORDS

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